

VOTE - Voter Outreach Through Education Washington Secretary of State

WASHINGTON STATE CURRICULUM GRADES 8-12

TEACHER: LESSON 3

THEME: DIMPLED BALLOTS, HANGING CHADS AND REFORM

Washington has never faced problems as large as Florida's in the 2000 presidential election. But we are as vulnerable to human error as any state in the country. Ten years before Bush v. Gore ended up in the U.S. Supreme Court, Washington State had its own share of problems, albeit on a much smaller scale. Following a mandatory recount in the race for a House seat in the 24th Legislative District in 1990, only three votes separated the two contenders, Anne Goos and Evan Jones. The state certified the election, giving the race to Jones.

During the mandatory recount, and then again subsequent to the certification, troubling elements surfaced. One of three counties in the district had never pre-inspected the voted ballots. (Such inspection allows authorities to catch accurate ballots the machines might otherwise reject.) Random ballots were discovered that had never been counted at all.

Because the race had already been certified, the Legislature determined that Jones would remain the winner and the three-vote difference would hold in his favor. However, the incident prompted the creation of a Washington program that serves as a national model for certification and training of local election officials. The 1990 case exemplifies the fundamental need for election reform, even in Washington, a state widely considered a national leader in election administration.

Students need to understand that their adult leaders are trying to learn from mistakes by making improvements in the election system. They need to feel that steps are being taken to enhance the reliability and credibility of voting results.

This lesson will:

1. Acquaint students with some of the recent reforms our state has implemented in the election system.
2. Engage students in critical thinking about the intent, impact and desirability of these changes.
3. Invite students to propose reforms of their own and communicate their ideas to elected officials.

ACTIVITY:

Below is a list of reforms that have occurred in the Washington State election system:

1. The Legislature paved the way for creation of a statewide voter-registration database that will help prevent fraud.
2. New rules have been adopted to:
 - help determine voter intent on questionable ballots,
 - determine how ballots must be counted when voter intent is questioned,
 - define a "valid" punch-card vote,
 - determine how damaged absentee ballots must be handled statewide,
 - determine how special ballots and physically damaged ballots must be handled.
3. The State Legislature has adopted election reform measures including the Voting Integrity Act, which:
 - ensures that people registering to vote are fully aware of the requirement to be a U.S. citizen,
 - provides a vehicle for voters to report fraud, and
 - gives prosecutors authority to take action against offenders.

Copy Student Lesson Three for each student. As an introduction, you may choose to teach them the background above. It is recommended that you also prepare a brief overview of the infamous voting problems associated with the 2000 Presidential Election. You should explain the difference between ballot system "reliability" (to produce accurate and consistent results) and "credibility" (to engender public confidence in the voting system.) Individually or in small groups, ask the students to examine the list of changes to our state election system in the last decades. Next ask them to address the questions that follow, either in writing or as a class discussion.

Answers:

1. All three.
2. It would allow a centralized information database in case there is a question about a voter's qualification.
3. Reform number two would help avoid inconsistencies that could occur between counties.
4. Voting by unqualified persons.
5. A central source of voter registration information could aid a voter who recently moved to a new precinct but never informed the county Elections Division.
6. Student answers will vary.
7. Student answers will vary.

An extension activity you might suggest to one or more students is to write a letter to the Secretary of State (www.secstate.wa.gov), or to their district's State Legislator (www.leg.wa.gov), or U.S. Congressional member (you can link from the Secretary of State site) expressing their views on election reforms. This could be in support or in opposition to one of those listed on their activity sheets or it could be their original suggestions for reforms not listed.